

Chapter 23 - Death by Sealing the Deal

Solene found a place where she could cry her heart out and oddly enough, it was the center of the maze where the statue of the theta lay. This was illuminated with soft spotlights numerous enough to make her feel safe around the darkness of the area. She sat at the edge of the fountain and brought her knees closer together so that her head could rest, while the grimoire, well, she left it lying on the ground. She didn't have an urge to open it yet.

There was not a single sound of her sob, but her eyes streamed grossly with tears. They fell like liquid crystals onto the cobblestone ground, similar to the fountain's splashes of water.

Indeed she felt betrayed by her family and it deeply stabbed her trust in them, but still, she understood their side as to why they had to keep the truth from her. After all, her mother and father got what they wanted. She was able to live her life normally, or at least for the past six years where the tattoos protected her from these so-called accidents. She was able to study through high school and even got a college degree where she could be proud of. She met great people, made friends, bonded with her best friend, and was able to simply go about her day to day living without the thought of ghosts and demons targeting her.

Those innocent days were over now, but she knew she was going to relish them forever, and that was something she was thankful for from her family. They truly gave her peace of mind.

Still, though, she wanted to welcome the feeling of betrayal squeezing her chest at least for this time. Crying her frustrations and disappointments out was part of the adjustment process. It was her only way when she had no best friend in this part of the world to talk to.

"Crying alone won't do you good," without warning, Henri emerged from the hedges.

Solene jerked up and cast him a surprised look. Quickly, she wiped her tears dry using her palm and inhaled hard.

"I'm not alone now," she pointed out, trying her best to sound stern.

Henri neared her but stopped just a couple of feet away. His attention fell on the book near her feet. Immediately, he knew what it was.

"I see that you're already wiser now," he remarked. "Is it selfish of me to ask for your innocence again?"

Solene laughed dryly.

"Not a chance, Henri. I prefer to be well-informed as much as possible even if the truth held so much weight." She took a breath and glanced at the stars above them. "You were right when you said I'd see this world and my life in a different light. Demons, specters, ghosts, what else? I never expected I'd be in their center of attention. All this time I thought I just had bad luck."

"Bad luck has nothing to do with your life, Solene, believe me when I tell you that," Henri commented, his face remaining neutral.

"The pictures in my head are clearer now," she stated. Shifting a little to face the fountain, she tested the pool's cold water with her fingers and then continued, "I was right. That time in the supermarket, you really did save me and my brother from falling to our deaths."

"Stopping time on command is one of my specialties, Solene," Henri confessed. "I merely transferred you and that boy to safety, but after that, I had to track the malevolent elemental spirit that wanted you dead."

Goosebumps erupted on Solene's arms. She definitely didn't need to know another entity desired her death, but it was satisfying to hear his side of the story.

"And in...in the cafe, you were the one who pushed me down and shielded me from the crash," she went on.

"It looked like an accident, but in truth, a low-class demon possessed the driver and controlled him to ram the car into the cafe, directly to your path," he explained. "I was there to ensure your safety, Solene. These measly low-class demons are getting creative and bolder with their attempts to kill you."

An icy chill crept up to her nape upon hearing it. She clenched her teeth in an attempt to control her panic from taking over her consciousness. He was definitely not holding back on information now.

"I...I don't know how you did it but you also saved me from those heavy books in the library," she continued.

"I used my shadows to shield you. Those dead spirits in the library were

just mischievous, trying their luck in scaring you to death."

"Damn it," Solene's thought out loud. She knew she could see otherworldly beings just like her father, but why was it not working in times when her life was in danger? It would have helped her fend them off!

"And let me guess, in our flight going to this country, you did something while we're thirty-five thousand feet above the ground right?" she added, trying to piece together the reason why he didn't show himself in the first hours of their flight.

Henri simply nodded. "I made sure our airplane left Germaine still intact, Solene."

"And that hostage incident in Madame Floresca's boutique. You did something to that man right?"

Solene now felt frustrated by just how clueless she was in those times. If she only knew right from the start and if she already had her powers, she wouldn't have needed his every presence to save her.

"Like you, I have abilities too. The Rantzen Family and its grim reapers are blessed with powers straight from the spiritual realm...or better called Hell in this world's term. I only made that man see what real agony looks like."

Solene's brows tightened into a frown. She tossed the pool a hard look, hoping that the calmness of the water would ease her frustrations.

"I don't want you to think that you owe me for saving you multiple times, Solene. You don't. It is my job as your betrothed," Henri stated. He watched her in deep thought, remain stiff as a statue and so he decided to continue.

"The marriage agreement still stands, but I also don't want you to think you were robbed of your freedom to choose. Yes, your father wants the best for you that's why he wants you married to the Rantzen Clan, however, I want you to know you have every right to back out from our wedding. I won't hold it against you. If you want to call our wedding off, I would understand. This won't be disrespecting your father's memory or his dying wish too. You are simply exercising your right as a grown woman."

"Would your family still protect me even if we are not wed?" Solene questioned, throwing him a solemn look.

Henri didn't need to contemplate. He already knew the answer.

"The Rantzen Family only cares about their own gain. When it doesn't benefit them, then there would be no point in investing their effort, money, and time."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," she expressed with another dry laugh.

"But," Henri interrupted and stepped forward, closer to her. "That's them and this is me. I'm different, Solene. I will protect you even if you decline to be my wife."

Her eyes narrowed at him then.

"Personally speaking, what's in it for you, Henri? If you still wish to protect me, then tell me why?"

"Haven't I made myself clear?" he quickly answered. "You are special to me."

Solene scoffed upon hearing it. "Does your attraction have something to do with me being a conjurer? That position sure puts a big price tag on my head."

"No," was Henri's frank answer, "and that is the truth. All I want is you, Solene."

He closed the space between them and reached out to caress her face. The contact of their skin made Solene remember their intimate moments together and as a result, this caused her stomach to tingle and her whole body to flame up. It reminded her that she enjoyed every bit of his advances and that she wasn't immune to his charms. Just like before, he successfully made her feel singular. Special. He didn't care about her powers or her family lineage. He cared about her as her. And once again, it made her heart swell.

"You really are frank with your words, Henri," she lowered her eyes on the ground and bit her lower lip.

"I am." He gave her a brief smile.

Solene inhaled sharply, stood up, and met his gaze. "But I choose to continue with the agreement. I want to see this through to the end."

She thought about her father and his wish, and yes, she was going to fulfill it. However, this was only her third reason. The first was for her and her

family's well-being and safety. If there were demons and other entities out to kill her, then might as well be under the Rantzen's protection. The second reason was to fulfill a promise to her six-year-old self. A promise of vengeance. Knowing that the Rantzen Clan was a family of grim reapers, she was now one step closer to finding that dark blue-haired man and avenge her father's death.

"I will marry you tomorrow, but in return, train me. I don't want you always saving me. I want to protect myself and my family. Also, I bet you know about conjurers. I'm sure you can find someone who knows how to teach me to use my powers."

Henri shook his head in response. "No," he said, "you don't need education, Solene. I assumed your father placed a spell on you. Once you turn twenty-one, the powers you inherited from your father, and all knowledge expected of a conjurer will be unlocked. As you are now, you only need guidance."

"Then, have someone guide me," she quickly bargained.

Henri saw the determination in her eyes and admired it. "Lady Ursula can do that for you. She is a conjurer too, but not as powerful as you will be."

"It's a deal then," she stated and thereafter took a breath of relief.

This time, Henri flashed a satisfied smile. He bent on one knee, much to Solene's surprise, and stared at her with calculating eyes.

"I had never proposed marriage to you, so allow me to take this opportunity to do just that," he said.

Solene quickly shook her head. "No, you don't need to Henri."

"Oh but I insist," he exclaimed. "Marry me, Solene St. Fair, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, death will not break us apart."

Solene knotted her brows. Certainly, his last words differed greatly with the traditional vows, but she just shrugged this thought away.

"I'm already wearing your ring, Henri," she answered, showing him the black-gold jewelry he gave on her first night in the estate.

Henri stood up and grabbed her hand. "Then give me a kiss to seal our deal, Solene."

He lowered his head and paused mere inches away from her lips.

Solene saw the question in his eyes. He was waiting for her approval and he was giving her complete control.

With this, she tipped her chin up and just as he requested, sealed their deal by way of a kiss.